

The Future of General Practice in Northern Ireland

A 10-year strategy

from 2010



Royal College of
General Practitioners



Foreword

I am pleased to pen this foreword to *'The Future of General Practice in Northern Ireland'*. In doing so, I would take this opportunity to acknowledge the vital role that GP practices play in the delivery of front line Primary Health Care Services in Northern Ireland.

I welcome and commend NIGPC and RCGP for their initiative in developing this Strategy. The proposals contained within it will challenge General Practice to develop and evolve its management and organisational structures, as primary care develops and evolves, to ensure that GP practices remain at the forefront of primary care, and that patients will continue to benefit from the improving healthcare services they provide.

Partnership across the various providers in primary and community care is essential for the effective delivery of health care to patients, and increasingly, those with more complex and long term conditions; and GP Practices will play a key role in managing the long term care needs for all these patients.

In doing so they will be required to maintain and develop relationships with a wide range of health service providers so that patients receive the best care possible. The Review of Public Administration has sought to deliver a more efficient and streamlined Health and Social Care service; this Strategy shows that the GP profession is responding positively to these changes. Partnership working, not only across sectors but across disciplines, will define primary care in the future, and I welcome this Strategy in working toward these aims.

Since the introduction of the 2004 GP Contract my Department has made substantial investment in primary care which has brought about significant improvement in the delivery of primary medical services in Northern Ireland. These changes have been of considerable benefit to patients, through the delivery of high quality services. GPs have also benefited, in particular through better funding arrangements and in providing the flexibility for more family-friendly working arrangements.

The next decade, with its undoubtedly difficult financial climate, will no doubt present new challenges for the delivery of Primary Health Care Services in terms of addressing patients' more sophisticated expectations and more complex health care needs, as well as the need for all involved in the health service to become increasingly efficient and focused in the delivery of services. This Strategy recognises and embraces this, particularly in developing the leadership of the profession so that General Practice can gear itself up for the challenges ahead.

My Department is committed to meet these challenges by developing with key stakeholders the necessary policies and strategies to ensure that patients' entitlement to high quality health care is maintained. The *'Future of General Practice'* strategy will inform and contribute to the development of those policies and strategies.

I look forward to maintaining our very productive working relationship with General Practice as we continue to work together, with all our key stakeholders including the Regional Health and Social Care Board and the Social Care Trusts, to develop and manage improvements in health care services in our communities.



Michael McGimpsey MLA
Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety

The Future of General Practice

Primary care is the cornerstone of the health service within the UK. The quality of care given, coupled with the patient experience have long remained the core values of general practice within Northern Ireland. GPs have made massive strides forward in maintaining a professional service whilst constantly improving access and choices available in order to meet the needs of their patients.

The British Medical Association (BMA) and the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) recognise that there have been many changes to our healthcare service, and yet more are needed to secure a vibrant and patient-focused general practice.

General practice must remain at the centre of our ever evolving health care system as we move forward into the future, to ensure that patients receive the optimum quality of care and value for money, with the ultimate aim of producing a better patient experience for everyone.

This strategy embodies the views, opinions and directions from many organisations involved in the delivery of our health services to allow us the opportunity to develop a system fit for purpose for the future. This document offers the first genuine, strategic vision into how general practice can tackle the challenges within our health system, whilst remaining focused on the future development of the profession.

By working in partnership with GPs and key stakeholders, we believe that the strategy will ensure that the high standards of general practice are maintained, the profession is equipped with the adequate resources and that the correct structures are put in place to enhance the ability of general practice to tackle future challenges.

There can be no doubt that a well structured, adequately resourced general practice, at the forefront of our healthcare system, will provide patient care that we can all be proud of.



Dr David Johnston



Dr Brian Dunn

The role of General Practice

General practice is the provision of primary, continuing and comprehensive whole-patient medical care to individuals, families and communities.

GPs deal with around 90% of health-related cases within the NHS.

The Role of a GP

A general practitioner (GP) is a medical doctor who provides health care advice and treatment. They are called “general practitioners” because they look at the health of the whole person, and this includes their mental health as well as their physical wellbeing.

A GP is often the first point of contact for most health problems. They also try to encourage healthy habits to improve health and wellbeing. A GP can help a patient talk through problems, prescribe medicine where appropriate, and make referrals where necessary.

Core Values

GPs adhere to the core values of general practice to ensure that patients get the best service possible. These include:

- Promoting a health service that is universal and free at the point of delivery
- Prioritising services to meet patients’ needs and ensuring continuity of care
- Providing a professional service and ensuring that patients have access to care when it is needed
- Referring patients appropriately to other healthcare services
- Working in partnership with other providers in the health service and ensuring continuity of relationships
- Embracing a federated approach for GP practices to work together, to assist and support small practices so that they can meet their business and development needs into the future
- Continuously improving quality
- Being responsive to the evolving priorities of the health service through involvement in commissioning
- Providing a confidential consultative role, and advocating on behalf of patients

Quality of Service

GPs in Northern Ireland continue to demonstrate exceptionally high standards of patient care in the national system that measures the quality of services they provide.

Latest figures for the Quality and Outcomes Framework (QOF) published in 2009 show general practice teams in Northern Ireland achieved 97.3% of the maximum points available, compared to 95.4% achieved by general practice within England.

Value for Money

General practice delivers high quality services with fewer doctors per head of population than most of our European neighbours.

Given that more people are being treated in their community in primary care, which is cost effective, BMA and the Royal College of GPs would urge that the balance of investment is shifted so that there is greater investment in primary care.

The excellent value for money offered by GP services can only be achieved by fully understanding the complex nature of primary care and managing resources appropriately.

Patient Experience

The GP–patient relationship and the continuity of quality care has made Northern Ireland’s health system a massive success story within the NHS.

- 94% of patients are satisfied with the service they receive at their local surgery
- 97% of patients have clearly indicated that they have confidence and trust in the quality of care given by their GP¹

Maintaining and improving the quality of the patient experience and the provision of care are key priorities for general practice. The focus for GPs is to continue to provide a service which will enhance the experience for all of their patients well into the future.

The Need For A Strategy

The delivery of high quality patient care remains paramount and to ensure this, it is essential that GPs remain at the forefront of healthcare delivery and development in Northern Ireland. Given the changing healthcare environment due to government agendas and patient expectations; the core values of general practice, which focus on patients' needs, must underpin all aspects of primary care.

GPs have worked together to develop this strategy, and have also consulted with patient advocates.

What does the strategy contain?

The key element of this strategy is an action plan for delivering on the key challenges identified.

Areas in which action must be taken to ensure that general practice continues to provide health care for the benefit of patients throughout Northern Ireland include:

Developing a framework for effective management of general practice in the future

This will enable services to continue to be delivered in an effective and efficient way.

Improving leadership and management effectiveness within general practice

This will ensure effective business and management at practice level through the development and delivery of leadership skill programmes.

Improving organisation within the infrastructure of general practice

To maximise the potential of general practice we need to increase its organisational development, for example through federations of practices.

Improving service and accessibility

In 2009, 97% of patients reported easy access to their GP surgery, with 95% of patients finding their surgery's receptionist helpful. However, sustained investment in GP practices is needed to meet the growing demand for accessibility of services.²

Working with Trusts and Commissioners

The BMA and the RCGP fully recognise that in order to promote a holistic approach to primary care, new professional partnerships must be developed throughout the healthcare system.

Resourcing general practice

Sustained investment into areas of education, GP premises, information technology and skilled workforces are key to the future success of the health and social care service.

Promoting the unique selling points of general practice

General practice is unique. GPs are generalists who provide quality, continuous care to their patients, some of whom they have known for many years. They are patient advocates based at the heart of communities.

GPs must strive to maintain the trust and high regard in which their patients view them.

Identifying and addressing competition issues

It is important that primary care services are not fragmented, as this could impact greatly on the continuity of care for patients. New commissioning arrangements would provide opportunities for general practice to provide new services to complement and enhance services already provided.

Addressing the educational and training needs of general practice

Education and research is central to the development of local health services. General practice must take the lead in developing the capacity needed to undertake high quality, meaningful, translational research within the primary care setting. Patient input is essential to achieve this.

Monitoring the impact of medical regulation arrangements

GPs understand the importance of professional regulation and the benefits to patients. The BMA and RCGP will engage with the profession to ascertain the impact of new arrangements on GPs and ensure that there is no detracting from patient care.

Who we are

The British Medical Association (BMA) is a trade union and professional association that represents doctors. It also advocates on behalf of patients and lobbies government to ensure that patient care is of the highest quality.

BMA(NI)

16 Cromac Place
Cromac Wood
Ormeau Road
Belfast
BT7 2JB
Telephone: 028 9026 9666
Email: bmanorthernireland@bma.org.uk

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) is the professional membership body for family doctors in the UK and abroad. As a registered charity it is committed to improving patient care, clinical standards and GP training.

RCGP(NI)

Building 4, Ground Floor,
Cromac Place, Ormeau Road,
Belfast
BT7 2JB
Telephone: 028 9023 0055
Email: nicouncil@rcgp.org.uk

¹ The GP Patient Survey in Northern Ireland 2008/09 Summary Report; *Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety* 2009

² Ibid